

RCTAG AND NETWORK MEETING

London, 24 November 2014

Following several presentations on the challenges of the immediate post-PhD phase for Early Career Researchers, attendees separated into three discussion groups to examine these issues more deeply. The points below are a summary of these discussions:

- Even within the same RO, there can be several different definitions of 'Early Career Researcher' (ECR), and it was not always clear whether this covered people employed on short-term teaching contracts, but who were pursuing research and publishing in their own time.
- Participants felt that supervisors should make clear to students the small number of academic posts that come up in any year, and that even for the best candidates there was luck involved (e.g. are they looking for someone in your field?). In terms of career advice, it was thought that supervisors were often unable to provide effective guidance on, or references for, employment beyond the academy, as they might have little non-academic experience themselves. It was suggested that ROs should train supervisors in this area, and direct students to the RO's careers services or to external subscription services, such as VersatilePhD. It was suggested that the subject associations could do more to help advise ECRs. It was also proposed that the AHRC use ECR alumni to mentor current ECRs and finishing doctoral students; students and ECRs might be likely to be more open with mentors than with their supervisors.
- In terms of their academic profile, ECRs needed advice on what to publish and where, and also to develop a portfolio of experience outside their doctoral research, such as teaching and conference organisation. It was thought that ECRs needed to have personal development time built into their employment, as they often lack the time to take advantage of opportunities, especially if they are working in several part-time jobs. Where training is made available, it was thought that it should be tailored to the Arts & Humanities, as it seems to be less effective when delivered cross-discipline.
- ECRs should be made aware of opportunities to gain additional experience, such as getting involved in RO administrative committees (thereby benefitting both the RO

and the ECR). It was thought useful to have a Research Staff Association in this context as a body that the RO could approach when ECR members were needed for committees, and also as a group to consult and to feed back to. ECRs could be more engaged in panels for internal funding schemes, to gain experience of peer review, for example. ECRs would also benefit from training on how to be a PI and managing staff.

- It was suggested that the best way to help people make a positive career change is by highlighting and clearly valuing the people who had already made that transition, and by getting them to talk about their experience with current students and ECRs.
- There was also concern at the idea of a PhD being longer than 3 years, because it could result in people spending more time studying and not becoming more employable. There was broad agreement that the longer people are in academia, the more difficult the transition becomes.
- It would be useful to have a wider understanding of graduates who work outside academia, in terms of the range of roles they undertake and the skills employed. Providing case studies is a good way of illustrating the rich variety of careers in other sectors and how their doctoral and postdoctoral experience has enabled and contributed to these opportunities. This information might be gained through better use of alumni networking.
- It was felt that the growing practice of employing ECRs casually as General Teaching Assistants (GTAs) was perhaps limiting the diversity of the academic environment. There is usually no advertising budget for these posts, and recruitment is often done through informal networks. As these GTA positions are important stepping stones for a future academic career, it was worrying that the pool of employable ECR talent was potentially being limited at this stage.
- Several participants asked the AHRC to champion the idea that universities should allow doctoral graduates to remain affiliated for 5 years after graduation. This could involve allowing them to retain library access to assist in their research, and a clear institutional affiliation means someone can avoid the perceived stigma of being an 'independent researcher' for publication and conference purposes. Also, ROs could do more to offer small grant funding to ECRs. In the Arts & Humanities sector, much can be done with limited funds, and these grants would also strengthen ECRs' profiles when applying for academic posts.